The Fourth Church Pulpit

IN A MIRROR, DIMLY

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Mark 1:1-8, Exodus 33:17-23, 1 Corinthians 13:11-13

. . . For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face . . ."
1 Corinthians 13:12 (NRSV)

I confess. I read *U.S.A. Today* on airplanes when I'm away from home and can't get a *Chicago Tribune* or *Sun-Times*. Two weeks ago I opened *U.S.A. Today* and my eye was caught by a familiar picture: the Water Tower and a headline, "Chicago: Shop at the Top Along the Magnificent Mile." It's always fun to read about your own neighborhood and besides, when I encounter a phrase like "at the top of the Magnificent Mile," I'm inclined to think Fourth Presbyterian Church. I was disappointed. We never made the article. But neither did Jesus.

A personal shopper set the tone:

> "Her red scarf rippling in the off-the-lake breeze, standing in front of the new Escada Boutique . . . beaming at the bustle of scurrying shoppers. . .
>
> "'Just look at it' she says, gripping her wide-brimmed hat against the wind. 'They'd never heard of a croissant in this town when I came here . . . Now there's nowhere else with so much culture and fashion in one place, on one street.'
>
> "Move aside Mall of America and New York's Fifth Avenue. When it comes to picking a holiday shopping destination, look no farther than Michigan Avenue, right here in the Windy City." [*U. S. Today,* November 11, 1993]

And I thought once again about the contrasts and the fact that on this holiday weekend, the wonderful ɔnverging of Thanksgiving and the beginning of Advent, that in a sense Christmas will already have come, with all the Christmas decorations and lights sparkling, sidewalks crowded, Salvation Army trumpets playing, and over the heads of shoppers crammed on escalators of Water Tower Place, if you listen carefully: "Silent Night, Holy Night. All is calm, all is bright." And I thought about us launching our Christmas preparations with a few garlands of green and purple and by singing a truly magnificent but not exactly festive hymn:

> "Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
> And with fear and trembling stand;
> Ponder nothing earthly minded, . . ."

What kind of way to start a festival is that? Just when the world is gearing up for the best party of the year, the church — which after all has something of an investment in the party's origin — is hearing about voices in the wilderness and people walking around in darkness, about exile and waiting and longing . . . and about keeping silence and standing in fear and trembling.

There has always been a defining contrast between what the world expects of us and who God's people actually are. In A. N. Wilson's biography, *Jesus: A Life,* there is a fascinating historical vignette:

> ". . . in 63 B.C.E. Pompey had profanely set foot in the Holy of Holies in the Temple and been astonished at what he found there." On the one hand, he was impressed with the magnificence of the temple buildings, the ornamentation, the spice cups, lamps, censers of solid gold. "On the other hand, the general was haunted by what was not in that sanctuary, as much as by what was. There was no visible god, no statue, no idol, no Delphic oracle, no inscription. The sanctuary was empty . . ." Pompey's Roman Army had just completed the absolute defeat of the Jewish forces — an estimated 12,000 Jews had died defending their land and religion. Pompey

had expected to find in the legendary Holy of Holies "a mighty god, some monstrous deity of the sort worshiped by the Cretans or the Egyptians. Instead he found the secret of the Jews' vulnerability and their indomitability: an empty sanctuary, a temple dedicated to the Unseen and Invisible God." [*Jesus, A Life,* p. 95]

One of the major themes in the Hebrew scriptures, and one of the foundational ideas of our Christian faith and therefore one of the ideas the church has always tried to remember in Advent is the hiddenness of God, the mystery, the incompleteness of human knowledge of God.

The second lesson this morning began with a wonderful story from the distant past. Moses has led the children of Israel out of Egyptian slavery. Now they have come to Mt. Sinai; God and Moses are having a little chat. They talk and talk about how the people are going to survive. God gives Moses some rules for the people to follow, but when Moses brings the new law to the people on tablets of stone he discovers them, worshiping a foreign god, already having forgotten and forsaken the Lord. In a fit of rage Moses shatters the stone tablets. This is not going to be easy!

So now, he's back on the mountain, visibly shaken, uncertain about the people's commitment to the task of making it to the Promised Land; but in a much deeper sense, I think, uncertain about the whole project. Did God really call him to lead the people? Did God actually lead them out of slavery — or was it merely his own relentless ego — always looking for an adventure and calling it God's plan? Did God actually speak to Moses out of the burning bush or was it his own wishful thinking — his own imagination? It's a crisis of faith and it's not academic. Moses is about to commit what remains of his life to God and God's plan to bring the people to the Promised Land. What Moses needs, frankly, is a little certainty that he's doing the right thing; certainty that God cares about this journey and about him, Moses, his life; certainty that God is there, that God is.

Moses wants something to hold onto: something he can see. "At least let me see your Glory," he says to God. And then he gets an answer . . . of sorts, a very provocative answer, actually.

> "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name, but you cannot see my face.
>
> ". . . for no one shall see me and live . . . see there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock: and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft in the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by: then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back: but my face shall not be seen." [Exodus 33:20-23]

All Moses wants is some simple evidence, some certainty that he's following God and not his own wishful thinking; a little less mystery and a little more verifiable data. Moses represents, I think, a familiar impulse which is always to reduce the mystery, to make the eternal a little more accessible; to simplify things, make matters a little more manageable. But this understandable impulse bumps into one of the most important notions of all — the hiddenness, the essential mystery of God.

It's why God's people are forbidden to have idols, because an idol eliminates the mystery and leaves the worshiper with the false assurance that the reality of God is in the statue or the picture. Jurgen Moltmann, in a recent book, observes that

> "Christian theology is a theology of faith but not yet the theology of sight." [*The Spirit of Life,* p. 300]

Christians and Jews know an important secret, that is to say. When religious symbols or rituals or creeds or ideas become fixed dogma, and there is no more unknown, no more mystery, something unfortunate happens: religion is no longer faith — but knowledge . . . and human beings, in the process, are a little less human.

"Truly, you are a God who hides himself," the prophet Isaiah declared. [45:18] "We see through a glass darkly," the older translation rendered that haunting phrase in St. Paul's soliloquy on love. It's a misleading translation. The word is "mirror." And the only mirror anyone ever saw was a piece of polished bronze or silver. The best mirrors were made in Corinth. They were on sale in the market place. The only time most people saw anything of their own faces was strolling through the Agora, the market place in Corinth, stopping at a booth and picking up a small and very expensive piece of polished metal. Difficult for us even to imagine that. That hurried, brief glimpse of truth, that dim reflection of reality, says Paul, is what we know of God.

That is a key thought because it contrasts so absolutely with the way the world thinks. Western culture, for centuries, believed that human beings are capable of knowing everything. For a while at least, Western culture made the assumption that if human beings can't understand it, it isn't real. Scientific research, academic inquiry, human reason, would shine light into every darkness and abolish ignorance, superstition, mystery and, ultimately religion. The most rational ideology ever constructed by the human mind is Marxism and that is what it proposed . . . human reason will locate the truth: religion is a diversion, an opiate.

Nobody much talks like that anymore. Marxist philosophers started speaking to Christian theologians a generation ago because, among other distressing developments, people in Marxist lands kept turning to religious faith as a resource to sustain them through the blessings of a Marxist state.

Not many scientists talk like that any more either. Lewis Thomas was on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* last week. Dying of cancer and facing ultimate mystery, Thomas is certainly not a traditional believer, but to the end he has celebrated mystery and has reminded, not only the scientific community, but those of us who too easily put our trust in science's promise of cold, hard, verifiable, weighable, measurable, truth — that we are not even close to solving the puzzles: that there is more mystery than ever, not less: that basic scientific research keeps expanding the horizons, not reducing them: that we don't actually understand very much except that we don't understand very much.

In a wonderful essay, *Mystery and Meaning,* the late Reinhold Niebuhr said that in our time the danger is not the people who know too little but people who claim to know too much. And he said the know-too-much types come in two categories: the scientific rationalists and the zealous religionists. Both add confusion to the conversation about what is true by claiming to know too much. The religionists, he said, act as if they know even the "furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell."
[*The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr,* Ed. by R. M. Brown, p. 237]

It's what makes it difficult for people who feel deeply about anything to talk to one another. If you already know the whole truth about politics or baseball or God, there isn't anywhere for a conversation to go except to become contentious and argumentative. It's because they are in possession of utter and absolute truth that Moslem fundamentalists wish to rid the human race of people who say things they don't like — like Salman Rushdie. It's how people convince themselves of the justice of killing other people over religion. Maybe that's why God wouldn't let Moses see his face. Maybe that's why Paul wrote about the dim distorted reflection in a mirror.

John Updike's novel, *Roger's Version,* is about a young computer graduate student who wants to prove the existence of God on a computer.

> "'God is breaking through,'" the earnest young student declares. "They've been scraping away at physical reality all these centuries, and now the little left we don't understand is so fine God's face is staring out at us." [p. 20]

He is shocked at the professor's response. It isn't enthusiastic at all. In fact, the computer student has missed the point and the genius of the Judeo/Christian tradition which John Updike understands and appreciates. "The Holy of Holies is empty — which is to say full of mystery."

> The professor says, "I find your whole idea repulsive . . . It eliminates faith from religion. It takes away our freedom to believe or to doubt." [p. 24]

The ancient Jews understood that it is not the job of religion to abolish mystery, and so there would be no idols, no statues, no representations of God. In fact, it is the job of religion to preserve the mystery. But sometimes religion cannot resist the temptation. In fact, in popular American culture religion without mystery, religion made simple and easy is far more popular. Any minister or musician who ever tried to observe Advent using the hymns which express the ancient theme of silence, waiting, mystery, learns — in no uncertain terms — that people would rather be singing about baby Jesus and angels and shepherds. Religion as knowledge: faith as a self-help program: devotion as an easy way to enhance your self-esteem and bring you better relationships, effectiveness on the job . . . is hot today — and straight, simple, understandable worship with all the lights on. A Roman Catholic scholar who had been attending a lot of contemporary worship wandered into a church like this one and heard the congregation singing about, God all glorious . . . Come, reign over us, Ancient of Days!" and mused:

> "How splendid an image: Ancient of Days. I have heard very little like it in church for two decades. What I have heard instead are choruses such as 'Be like the sun and shine on everyone,' sentiments more attuned to *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* or *Sesame Street* than to an act of divine worship." [Frederick Parella, *Christian Century,* 10/7/81]

Chicago columnist, Bill Granger, writes similarly on occasion by suggesting that if readers miss the old Catholic Mass and want to hear a little Latin on Sunday morning, the best chance in town is Fourth Presbyterian Church, an editorial that earned us new respect over at Holy Name Cathedral!

The ancient tradition of our faith is that God is hidden. No idols, no pictures, no statues. Nobody, not even Moses gets to see God's face. What you see of God is peeking out of a crack in the rock — God's hand blocking the view. And when you finally get a look, it's the back side of God, a tantalizing glimpse, hurried. What you and I can see of ultimate truth — final reality — is about as clear and complete and accurate as what you see when you look at your face in a piece of polished metal. And the question remains — the question that has intrigued, fascinated and frustrated the philosophers and poets, the theologians and the thinkers for thousands of years — Why? Why is God so stingy? Why the hesitation — the hiddenness of God? What's the point?

May I suggest that there is something important about us, about our humanity, that is established and enhanced and celebrated by the mystery of God, something about us that, on occasion at least, is glorious. We are never more gloriously and magnificently human than when we are trying to see God, probing, stretching, reaching for heaven . . . in art and music and literature; in medicine and engineering and the relentless push outward into space. It is a significant truth about us that in the midst of trying to solve the myriad of depressing problems besetting our society . . . we are sending five people into space this week to repair a telescope — a mirror actually — with which we hope to see the edge of the universe. God wants mystery because mystery

always inspires human curiosity and intellect and intelligence. It's almost as if God intentionally keeps us in the dark so that we'll keep looking for the light.

If you have been privileged to witness human birth, that moment when a new life emerges into the light and draws in breath and expels it in the most beautiful music — a newborn baby's cry, you know that we begin in mystery and that there are no words, no explanations however accurate, no pictures however clear, that adequately express the reality. And if you have had the privilege of witnessing human death, as life quietly ends, you know about final mystery, and that there is no clinical data that reflects the reality. And if you are privileged ever to have been passionately in love, you know there are no words to contain it.

Our beginning, the best of our living, and our ending are in mystery, in the mysterious reality we know as God. And so, is it not perfectly consistent that when God, in God's fullness of time, decided to disclose the truth it was not in a crashingly spectacular flash of lightning, but more like a candle in the dark? Is it not perfectly consistent that when the time for God's disclosure came in human history it was not the abolishment of mystery at all, but such an event that has set the human race to thinking and discussing and writing more than any other event in all of history? Is it not perfectly consistent that when it came time for ultimate truth telling it was in such an event that has inspired the human race to sing and make music, to paint and sculpt and build exquisite cathedrals? And is it not provocative that when men and women witness God's self-disclosure, their response is not the smug satisfaction of a quest ended, but an adventure begun? That truly to see God, is not to relax in the enjoyment of ultimate truth, but to set out on a journey of faith, reaching out in love and compassion and justice to neighbors? And is it not perfectly consistent that when it comes time to see the face of God what we see is the mystery of an infant's face and then, if we sustain our gaze, the mystery of a human face in love with the world and his friends and his people? And finally, the face of a man, dying on a Friday afternoon?

And so as the world around us hurries too soon to the celebration and gives itself to the festivities, you and I, who know something of what the celebration is for, begin quietly.

Before very long we will be singing "Joy to the World." But for now, is it not better to sing "Let all mortal flesh keep silence . . . and in fear and trembling stand," or a quiet carol about a small, gentle, beautiful rose blooming?

Amen.